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TESTIMONY

Before the

COMMITTEE ON POST OFFICE
AND CIVIL SERVICE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

On

DESIGN OF A SUPPLEMENTAL CIVIL SERVICE RETIREMENT SYSTEM

April 25, 1985

presented by
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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am Thomas Reilly, Legislative Assistant of the International Association of Fire Fighters, AFL-CIO-CLC. The IAFF represents approximately 170,000 professional fire fighters throughout the United States and Canada. Therefore, we are naturally quite appreciative for the opportunity to testify before you on provisions of the supplemental Civil Service Retirement System that affect fire fighters.

The paramount question that we would like to address is whether the hazardous nature of fire fighting, and here specifically federal fire fighting, warrants normal retirement at age 55 under the Civil Service Retirement System.

Our message is unambiguous: the hazards, the extreme risks, and sacrifices of fire fighting in our modern environment, unquestionably justify maintaining retirement at age 55 under the Civil Service Retirement System.

It is unnecessary to outline each dangerous responsibility and hazardous duty of fire fighting. We believe that most of our duties are self evident and the heavy work under extreme temperatures in hostile environments that fire fighters perform is well appreciated by the general public and law makers alike.

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Unfortunately what is not as well understood and appreciated are the physical effects of laboring for twenty to thirty years in burning environments which include toxic chemicals, gases, vapors, and other insidious elements, that are responsible for occupational diseases such as cancer and heart disease.

A brief examination of the health statistics of fire fighters reveals the alarming dangers and health effects of battling modern conflagrations. Fire fighters' line of duty mortality rate is greater than most all other professions. Heart disease is the number one killer in the country. What is shocking is that fire fighters die of heart disease at twice the rate of the general population and in a significant number of cases the first symptom of heart disease is death. It is important to note that we are speaking about a segment of society that is in above average physical condition upon entering the service. Fire fighters go through extensive testing prior to admittance into the fire service and only physically fit individuals are accepted --it is only after fulfilling the duties of fire fighting are fire fighters in far poorer health than the average American.

As tragic as fire fighting related deaths are, they have always been an occupational hazard of the profession. Roofs will give way, canisters of gases will explode, and burning buildings will collapse. Unfortunately, an occupational hazard that has been

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sinisterly increasing in recent times, is cancer contracted from modern toxic products.

I would like to focus on some notions that have muddled the discussions of hazardous duty retirement for fire fighters. Some have suggested that fire fighting as a profession is not as hazardous as it was thirty years ago because of revolutionary improvements in fire fighting gear. A brief review of the facts of fire fighting disproves the validity of such an assertion.

With the proliferation of hazardous chemicals in our environment, the dangers of lethal substances injuring fire fighters has increased proportionally. The effects of modern fire fighting injuries are not as tangible as traditional fire fighters' injuries such as burns, contusions, and bone fractures. The effects of exposure to toxic and hazardous materials and gases often do not surface in fire fighters until the fire fighter has retired: the time he is supposed to be enjoying his hard earned retirement he is all too often withering away from cancer. Let no one be confused: Occupational deaths attributable to cancer in fire fighters have steadily increased in the last several years. Currently cancer comprises more than one third of fire fighters' occupational deaths.

Fire fighters are first responders for every chemical plant

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mishap, every train and truck carrying hazardous material involved in an accident, and each and every dangerous emergency situation that occurs on a Department of Defense installation. Only now are people becoming aware of the dangers that chemical depots on military installations pose for the surrounding communities.

We are pleased at the public's heightened awareness of the dangers of modern industrial accidents. Unfortunately, disasters such as the tragedy that occured in Bhopal, India brought these dangers to the public's attention. What we want to bring to everyone's attention is that despite popular beliefs that super Chemical SWAT teams fully equipped with 21st century protective gear fly in to control accidents such as the infamous Bhopal tragedy, it is everyday fire fighters who must deal with such dangerous situations. Ordinary fire fighters with ordinary protective gear that they would don to battle a burning barn.

One misconception that is widespread is that the technology for fire protection gear has kept pace with the rapidly increasing chemical hazards of our modern environment. The stark and unpleasant facts are that fire fighters are woefully under protected from the dangers that they must deal with each day. Part of this is due to a deficiency of funds for gear--the other part is that since no one really understands the dangers and long term effects of toxic gases emitted from burning

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synthetics, toxic waste sites, etc., the scientific community has not produced viable and safe protective gear for fire fighters.

The ordinary turnout coat and rubber boots of the 1890's has been supplemented by breathing apparatus in the last few decades. Sadly, only occasional exposure to know carcinogenic agents can inflict lasting damage due to the fact that they can be absorbed through the skin.

Any suggestion that fire fighting has become a less hazardous profession over the decades is based on an unsubstantiated, fairy land myth.

Federal fire fighters are engaged in protecting military bases from the ravages of fires. We all are aware that military hardware, traditional military weapons and not so traditional chemical weapons, have proliferated in the past five years. One needs to take just a quick look at the burgeoning military budget to verify this. No one can make a convincing argument that with all the increases in the military weapons, the hazards of fighting a binary chemical accident or explosions at military bases have diminished. The dangers of protecting military bases from fires have not, in any way, reduced in recent times; the dangers have increased.

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Some have suggested that the fire service institute modern physical fitness testing that would determine if fire fighters should be retired at a later age instead of allowing for retirement automatically at age 55. We enthusiastically encourage members of the medical and scientific communities to create such an examination. The creation of any such test would be beneficial to all associated with the fire service. What we would like to stress is that to date, there is not a single test for fire fighters that can accurately determine their comprehensive conditions. No test evaluates the direct stress created by working under perilous circumstances in extreme temperatures. A fire fighter performs his or her duties in an environment that is comparable to war. The enemy is fire. Lives are saved or lost on the merits of split second decisions. The stress from fire fighting is as great as, and greater than most, any work.

Furthermore, there are no tests that can predict the latent effects of exposure to toxicity. The alarming statistics of increasing cancer rates for fire fighters are an indisputable indication that toxic exposure in the line of duty is a serious problem of unknown proportions that the medical community and others have not focused on.

Proposals to reduce many retirement provisions for federal employees focus on the bottom line without examining the

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effects, and of course the fairness, of their proposals. Older fire fighters are more prone to incurring job related injuries that would require paying disability payments if the fire fighter is forced off his or her job by a line of duty injury. Disability payments are far more costly than normal retirement payments and if reducing costs is most important, we think that this fact should be given greater consideration.

Fire fighters are given the responsibility to protect our families, our property, and insuring that if accidents do occur at military bases, their effects will be minimized and the maximum amount of lives saved. The risks of such duty are clear. The long range effects of toxic exposure is, at present time, unclear---but we are sure that the risks of fire fighting are great---greater than most every profession in the country and such warrant maintaining the hazardous retirement age provisions of the Civil Service Retirement System.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for granting us the time to address this important issue. At this time we would like to answer questions that anyone may have.

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